

RESPONSE TO 'SWATTING' CALLS

WILLIAMSTOWN POLICE DEPARTMENT POLICY & PROCEDURE NO. 7.12	EFFECTIVE DATE: 04/03/2023
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I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND GUIDELINES

Recently, our region has been the target of hoax calls for active shooter/hostile event reports. These hoax reports are more commonly called "swatting". They are intended to cause disruption, fear, and a full police response.

In one of the recent cases, the caller/email sender reports that he is currently in a bathroom at the school with a rifle and has just killed three people. He sounds to be out of breath while speaking and provides a false name. He then reports that he will exit the bathroom and continue to kill more people.

II. POLICY

Public safety agencies must respond to calls reporting an active threat as if the report were legitimate. The response protocols set forth in **7.11 Active Shooter Hostile Event Response** will be followed until we are able to determine the report is likely to be false. This needs to be done as effectively as possible without taxing responder resources unnecessarily so that a return to normal operations can be achieved for all involved.

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III. DEFINITIONS

- A.** *Swatting*: The placing or receipt of a communication, by any means, falsely reporting an active threat made for the purpose of eliciting a public safety response.

IV. PROCEDURES

A. Initial Screening

Since 'swatting' calls often occur in clusters, it is possible that such calls may be anticipated. However, due to the possibility of an actual active threat using a well-publicized spate of "swatting" calls to delay our response all such calls must be treated as actual reports of an active threat until screened out.

Dispatch should dispatch resources to the location of the threat in accordance with **7.11 – Active Shooter Hostile Event Response**.

The most effective and least time-consuming method of screening out false calls is to contact the targeted location via telephone. In almost all cases the targeted location will be unaware of the false call and will be conducting business as usual. As soon as the dispatcher can determine from persons actually present that there are no signs of an active threat responding units must be advised so that the response may be moderated.

If there are no obvious signs of an actual threat, the institution should be advised to enter lock down mode (if this is one of our local schools, protocols already exist for the occupants to "lock down" and they are trained accordingly). If the location is a business or institution not trained for lock downs, they should be advised to have all occupants shelter in place.

B. Initial Response

If dispatch is able to advise that there are no signs of an actual threat, responding officers should expeditiously respond to the location and enter the building as if an actual threat could exist. Rifles, tactical plate carriers, trauma kits and other equipment should be deployed as if an active threat could exist.

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If responding officers observe no signs of an actual threat, they should proceed to clear the common hallways and unlocked areas (e.g., cafeteria, auditorium, bathrooms) first. If safe to do so Officers should then release office staff and utilize the school administration to assist with clearing classrooms one by one allowing staff to instruct the class what to do next. Once the entire building is deemed clear and each classroom has been checked, school staff can then lift the lockdown status.

C. Duties of the Dispatcher

Until the dispatcher has determined from contact with persons actually present at the targeted location that no signs of an active threat exist, notification procedures as set forth in **7.11 – Active Shooter Hostile Event Response** shall be followed. Once it has been determined likely that no active threat exists, the modified procedure set forth below may be followed.

While Officers are responding to the area Dispatch, at the direction of the officer in charge of the shift, should contact Massachusetts State Police Cheshire barracks and request assistance. The same request should be made of Lanesborough Police and North Adams Police for any available units to assist. Advise these agencies that a “swatting” call is suspected.

If mutual aid requests do not produce additional responders, the officer in charge may direct Dispatch to send out an IAMRESPONDING message to the “TASK FORCE ONE” group. This will notify all police employees of an active event. The message should be “Active Shooter report located at ----- Possible Swatting Call, please respond to the station and then the scene.” Any available officers and dispatchers would then arrive and assist with calls (dispatchers) or respond to the scene once suited and in a cruiser. If not needed at the scene, the additional patrols may simply cover calls while the scene is handled.

D. Other Agencies

The Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services will be dispatched to the area of the targeted location and will assist by blocking entrance into the area from non-essential personnel. Only uniformed or easily identifiable (police coats/shirts) law enforcement officers should be entering the perimeter during the event.

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This will be a similar function they would provide at an actual hostile event, but with a smaller area of control, most likely not causing major road closures. The Fire Dept is aware of what is expected of them at these scenes and will handle the warm zone perimeter functions but should not be near the targeted location.

Fire/EMS will direct any civilians arriving at the targeted location to Town Hall to stage for information. Town Hall staff or a fire member will assist at Town Hall as needed/when available.

E. Comparison to Actual Threats

The major difference in response to suspected active shooter events as opposed to suspected hoax events is the amount of time that it will take to return to normal. In the suspected hoax response long term closures and command posts are not set up, there is no evacuation and reunification process. Once the building is clear most of the resources can clear.

These situations are fluid in nature and can change. Responding public safety personnel should be mindful that a false 'swatting' call could be staged to divert resources from an actual event, or that what appears to have been a false 'swatting' call could represent an actual threat that was interrupted by the response of officers prior to taking any action.

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